

Illuminations of the Spirit

Universal Wisdom of India
Anthology

Gwenaël Verez

ILLUMINATIONS OF THE SPIRIT - Universal Wisdom of India

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Agni Yoga, 1928. Roerich Nikolai Konstantinovich (1874-1947).

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*Dance my heart! dance today with joy.
The strains of love fill the days
and the nights with music
and the world is listening to its melodies.*

Kabir

*The wise man should, above all, apply himself assiduously
to the Realization of the Self.*

Shankara

*If, by good fortune, Self-realization was to be attained through experience,
then it would be necessary to strive to establish it.*

Jnaneshwara

*There is a great difference between direct experience and theory.
Likewise, between the direct perception of God
and the mental concept of God.*

Samarth Ramdas

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Introduction

In the mid-seventeenth century, Prince Dara Shukoh, eldest son of the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan, undertook the translation of some fifty upanishads from Sanskrit into Persian. In his work, *Majma-ul-Bahrain* or *The Confluence of the Two Seas*, Dara Shukoh asserted that the mystical and philosophical speculations of the authors of Vedanta converged with those of the Sufis. Thanks to this Persian version, later translated into Latin, the *Upanishads* first became known in Europe during the nineteenth century, exerting a profound influence in the West, from Arthur Schopenhauer to Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. It was also during this period that the first English, French and, subsequently, German translations of the *Bhagavad Gita* were published, coinciding with the advent of Sanskrit studies in European universities. Many writers drew inspiration from these texts, among them Albert Camus in *The Plague* and Somerset Maugham in *The Razor's Edge*.

In my youth, these works were a wellspring of inspiration in my search for spiritual meaning. Some years later, on an otherwise ordinary autumn day, my quest reached its resolution through the bliss of Self-realization.

Through the teachings of Shri Mataji Nirmala Devi (1923–2011), my spiritual horizon expanded to encompass other scriptures which – alongside the *Upanishads* – form the very foundations of India's spiritual tradition. These writings frequently echo the great biblical texts, such as *Genesis* or the *Gospels*, and help us, like Dara Shukoh – the otherwise

unknown Mughal prince – to recognize that universal quality of the wisdom of India. Since then, I have never ceased to be captivated by the spiritual depth of this literature which, answering the yearnings of my heart, could always elevate my soul. And which I would like to share in this anthology.

Here then, is a collection of texts, some dating back several millennia, composed by the greatest masters of India – Vasishta, Vyasa, Shankara, Gorakhnath, Jnaneshwara, Kabir, Vallabha and Samarth Ramdas, not forgetting the legendary Markandeya, who is said to have lived more than thirteen thousand years ago.

Some among them, such as Gorakhnath, remain virtually unknown outside India, where they are nonetheless held in the highest esteem. Although *Dasbodh* by Samarth Ramdas and *Jnaneshwari* – Jnaneshwara's celebrated rewriting of the *Bhagavad Gita* – have been translated into English, these translations often fail to grasp the most subtle meaning of these works which were originally written in old Marathi. These masterpieces offer profound insights into Self-realization, the essential stage of the spiritual quest.

This anthology brings together several excerpts from these two monumental works, as well as Jnaneshwara's little treasure: *Changdev Pasahsti* or *Letter to Changdev*.

Other saints and philosophers, such as Shankara or Kabir, enjoy greater renown, yet many of their works are now out of print and difficult to find. This volume seeks to make available once more a selection of their magnificent writings. Although leaving no writings of his own, it was impossible not to include Prince Siddhartha Gautama among India's great prophets: the few sayings of the Buddha presented here are drawn from the *Dhammapada*, the oldest Buddhist text.

Shri Mataji Nirmala Devi often praised these spiritual masters, whose writings, She said, are like mantras: their reading lifts our attention toward the Divine and immerses us in contemplation. The soul, enraptured by this literary grace, touches upon Bliss.

This collection brings together poems, prayers and invocations, as well as more philosophical reflections on the illusions that obscure the path to Spiritual Truth. Two satirical texts, by Samarth Ramdas and Kabir, on the flaws of human nature, lend a lighter touch to the whole. I have myself penned the titles, since these are most often extracts or poems that were originally untitled.

The writings have been chosen for their poetic beauty, their spiritual depth and their fervent devotion. Many of them stem from an oral tradition, centuries, and sometimes millennia, old, where wisdom was passed from master to disciple. Most scholars agree that due to this oral master-disciple lineage, as well as the late appearance of most manuscripts, authorship cannot always be ascribed with certainty. My purpose is not scholarly achievement, but rather a lifelong quest for spiritual fulfillment, an inner pilgrimage. Samarth Ramdas believed that a great work must nurture our spirituality, inspire our inner transformation and awaken the desire for devotional practice. Such is the aim of this anthology, devoted to the greatest Masters of India. The book concludes with *The Three Auras of God*, a hitherto unpublished text by Shri Mataji Nirmala Devi.

The present volume is an English translation of my own French rendering, originally published as *Lumières de l'Esprit*.

The Authors

The Disciple Principle¹ incarnated as Markandeya, Vasishta, Vyasa, Adi Shankaracharya, Kabir, Vallabhadas as well as the nine Naths, except for Macchindranath. Later on Goraknath was born as Jnaneshwara.²

Shri Mataji Nirmala Devi

Markandeya: a sage of Vedic times, author of the *Devi Mahatmyam*, the hymn to the Great Goddess that forms part of the *Markandeya Purana*. It is said that Markandeya meditated at Saptashringi, at the foot of the famous mountain, where there is a temple dedicated to the Great Goddess founded by him which has remained an important place of pilgrimage to this day.

Vasishta: a preceptor or tutor to Prince Rama, the seventh avatar of Vishnu. Vasishta was the great religious officer of Ayodhya, the kingdom of King Dasharatha, which extended over the whole of India and a large part of Eurasia. Vasishta conducted the marriage ceremony between Sita and Rama. He is the author of part of the *Rig Veda*, humanity's first collection of spiritual texts, derived from an oral tradition several thousand years old and written in ancient Sanskrit in the second millennium BCE. Most of them are hymns dedicated to the awakening of the elements (earth, air, fire, water, ether) in the form of aspects of nature

or the Deities of the elements such as Vayu, Agni, Varuna and Indra. Shankara considered Vasishtha as the first philosopher of Vedanta. *Yoga Vasishtha*, a famous text in India, relates the dialogues between Vasishtha and Prince Rama.

Vyasa: author of the epic *Mahabharata*, of which the *Bhagavad Gita* is a part. He is also the author of the *Srimad Devi Bhagavatam* (also known as the *Devi Purana*) and the *Bhagavata Purana*, two great texts on the founding myths of Indian spirituality.

The writings of Markandeya, Vasishtha and Vyasa come from a very ancient oral tradition, so we cannot be completely sure of their authenticity.

Shankara (also known as Adi Shankaracharya): born in Kerala in the eighth century during a period of religious unrest between followers of Buddhism and Hinduism. Often presented as India's greatest philosopher, Shankara is the main author of the Vedanta, with his commentaries on the sacred texts (*Brahma Sutra*, *Bhagavad Gita*, *Upanishads*) and many other writings such as *Viveka-Chuda-Mani*, *Saundarya Lahari* and numerous hymns to the Deities.

Gorakhnath: a disciple of Macchindranath (incarnation of the Primordial Master), probably from Bengal in the twelfth century. He was the founder of the order of Nath Yogis, who combined Hatha Yoga with knowledge of the chakras and the awakening of the Kundalini. He travelled throughout India to share his spiritual knowledge. Gorakhnath is considered in India to be the greatest of the yogis.

Many texts are falsely attributed to Shankara and Gorakhnath. Discernment is needed to separate the good grain from the chaff.

Jnaneshwara: a philosopher-saint from Maharashtra in the thirteenth century, author of the *Jnaneshwari*, his famous rewriting of the *Bhagavad Gita*, and the *Amritanubhava*. Many extracts from the *Jnaneshwari*,

including the description of the awakening of the Kundalini, have been selected for this anthology, as have some of his abhangas (hymns).

Kabir (1440-1518): a humble weaver born in Benares, philosopher and poet, both a Sufi Muslim and a Hindu. His poetry was oral and was transcribed by his disciples and then collected in several collections including the *Bijak* and the *Granthavali*. Some of his poems can also be found in the *Adigranth*, the holy book of the Sikhs. The collection *Songs of Kabir* is famous thanks to the literary aura of its translator, Rabindranath Tagore, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913.

Vallabha (1481-1533, also called Vallabhacharya): a philosopher born into a family originally from South India but living in Benares. After several pilgrimages across India, he settled in the village of Adel near Prayag (Allahabad) in the western Deccan. He preached non-dualism while being a great devotee of Shri Krishna. His spiritual message opposed monastic life and advocated contemplative and devotional meditation before images of Shri Krishna.

Samarth Ramdas (1608-1681): guru of Shivaji, the great liberator of the Deccan from the Mughal yoke. Author of numerous writings on the human condition, the best known of which is *Dasbodh*.

Jnaneshwara and Samarth Ramdas wrote all their works in the Marathi vernacular so that spirituality would be accessible to the masses and no longer limited to scholars knowledgeable in Sanskrit.

1 The Disciple Principle: a divine principle that incarnates to show that man can attain salvation. Prince Gautama, who became the Buddha after his Nirvana, is the model par excellence. Shri Mataji Nirmala Devi gave other examples outside India, such as the kings of Israel, David and Solomon, Hassan and Hussein – the two grandsons of the Prophet Muhammad – as well as William Blake and Khalil Gibran. She pointed out that, for them, it was not a question of metempsychosis, but of the incarnation of an absolute divine principle.

2 Excerpts taken from an unpublished text by Shri Mataji Nirmala Devi, which can be found in its entirety at <https://tinyurl.com/smndbook>.

Glossary

Akasha: in Sanskrit, the fifth element, translated into English as ether (obviously not the chemical element). It corresponds to the sky, to space, to the firmament.

Adishakti: Primordial Energy, the Great Goddess, also known as Mahamaya, the Great Illusion (Markandeya, Vyasa), Mula Prakriti, the Original Nature (Sage Kapila at the origin of Sankhya), Mulamaya, the Primordial Illusion (Samarth Ramdas).

Atman: the Self, the Spirit, the Absolute. It resides in the heart. It is Shri Shiva. At the cosmic and universal level, it is Brahman (Gorakhnath, Shankara, Ramdas, Jnaneshwara), Purusha, Parameshwara – the Supreme Lord, Sadashiva, God the Father.

Arjuna: disciple of Shri Krishna who reveals the *Bhagavad Gita* to him and gives him Self-realization.

Bhavasagara: the Ocean of Illusions, i.e. everything in life that veils the Spirit. The soul's wandering through this ocean is known as Samsara.

Chakras: spiritual centres that correspond to nerve plexuses in the gross body.

Guru: the spiritual master who has had his Self-realization and can therefore pass it on to others. When the disciple is himself realized, the guru is no longer external, but within, as the Atman.

Gunas: the three energy channels that manage emotions (*Tamo Guna* or *Ida Nadi*), action (*Rajo Guna* or *Pingala Nadi*) and harmony, evolution (*Sattwa Guna*). India's Divine Trinity is reflected in the gunas: Shri Shiva is associated with the *Tamo Guna*, Shri Brahma with the *Rajo Guna* and Shri Vishnu with the *Sattwa Guna*. Sattwa or Sushumna corresponds to the Parasympathetic nervous system while Tamo and Rajo Guna correspond to the orthosympathetic nervous system.

Kochas: the five envelopes of the gross body, corresponding to the auras of the first five chakras.

Kalpa: a cosmic period corresponding to a series of cycles – *yuga* in Sanskrit – comprising a Golden Age (*Satya Yuga*), a Silver Age (*Treta Yuga*), followed by the *Dvapara Yuga* and ending with the Dark Age (*Kali Yuga*). The Age of Aquarius heralds a new cycle with the beginning of a new golden age. Each kalpa ends with the dissolution of the universe.

Kundalini: the spiritual energy coiled in the sacrum, dormant until awakened through Self-realization. When the Kundalini reaches the top of the head at the fontanelle (the *Brahmarandra* in Sanskrit), it unites with the Atman, which is thus awakened into consciousness. The individual is then aware that he is the Self, the Atman. Kundalini is the *Spiritus Sanctus* of the Christian tradition, the *Shekina* of the Jewish tradition and is symbolized by *al-Buraq* in the mystical of Islam.

Mani Dvipa: the celestial abode of the Great Goddess.

Nadis: channels carrying the vital energies of the three gunas, as well as *Param Chaitanya*, the omnipresent energy of Divine Love.

Naths: spiritual school originating with the sages Macchindranath and Gorakhnath. From the twelfth century onwards, its aim was to combine

the asceticism of Hatha Yoga with the knowledge of the subtle body (the chakras and the nadis) and the awakening of the Kundalini.

Pralaya: the end of the Universe. The Great Dissolution of matter at the end of time.

Shesha: the mythical serpent that resides on the Cosmic Ocean and on which Shri Vishnu rests between two *kalpas*.

Sushumna: the central part of the *Sattwa Guna* in which the Kundalini rises.

Sahaj: spontaneous, innate. For Gorakhnath, Kabir and Ramdas, Self-realization is a *sahaj* process, comparable to the seed that germinates when the time is right. The state of Union with the Self, often called *Sahaja-Samadhi*, of course requires the effort of discernment and introspection to be established. This is the message of all the Prophets.

Samsara: the cycle of births and rebirths that ends, in tradition, with God-realization.

Upanishads: Sanskrit spiritual texts of the late Vedic and post-Vedic periods.

Vayu: the Deity of the primordial element of the wind or air, the consciousness of the air element. For Jnaneshwara and Samarth Ramdas, it is through Vayu that Kundalini or Adishakti manifests. We have most often translated it as breath, breeze or wind.

Vedanta: philosophical and spiritual tradition in India dealing with the relationship between the individual and the Divine.

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Prologue

Tribute to the Poets

They are called poets for their ability to describe the Glory of God. They are adorned with the power and richness of words to describe the importance of the Lord of the Universe.

A reservoir of intellectual skills, they are the Ocean of the Jewels of Language and the Lake of Salvation for realized souls.

Like the wish-fulfilling tree of imagination, poets are the majestic expression of freedom and the vast expanse of ultimate salvation.

They are the sign of the Formless and they aptly describe the wondrous illusion.

Reading their works is a spiritual practice for seekers of truth and a fulfillment for realized souls.

Samarth Ramdas

*There is no doubt that by reading the greatness of these spiritual texts,
the intellect becomes pure.
Without them, life would be vain and frivolous.*

Samarth Ramdas

1

The Spirit

The Truth is that which the wise find in their hearts.

Rig Veda

*In every beating heart, the Lord of Life has his abode.
Reach the purest of the pure by the gentle sahaj path.*

Guru Nanak

*He plays in the heart.
He has no form. He is infinite.*

Kabir

*The Spirit is a constant reality.
It is ignorance that makes one believe the Spirit is a goal to be attained.*

Shankara

The Atman

There exists an Absolute Being, an Inexpressible One. He is eternal and the original cause. He is the witness of the states of waking, dreaming and deep sleep. He is distinct from the five sheaths of the body that constitute human individuality.

He is the knower of all that takes place in waking, dreaming and deep sleep. He is the one who never ceases to be aware, regardless of the presence or absence of the mind and its processes. He is the constant support of our very Self.

He observes the entire play of existence, yet no one has ever observed Him. He enlightens all things, including intelligence itself, yet no one can enlighten Him.

He pervades the whole world, but nothing can pervade Him. He is the one whose radiance is reflected on the universe and He clothes it in his splendour.

His very presence keeps the body, the organs, the mind and the intellect within their scope. Like diligent servants, they await all the orders of the Master.

It is through Him that everything that exists, from the sense of self to the gross body, including the objects of the senses, is known as clearly as if it were a simple jar, for He is the essence of Eternal Knowledge.

He is the Atman who dwells in the depths of every individual. He is the Ancient One, the Primordial Being whose nature is the never-ending realization of Supreme Bliss. He always remains forever the same

as Himself, and yet, He glimmers through the manifold transformations of the mind.

Within this gross body, He reigns as the Pure Truth. Within the secret sanctuary of the illumined intelligence, He shines forth – like the sun in the heavens – manifesting this universe and clothing it in his light.

Although He knows the transformations of the mind and of the sense of ego as well as the changes in the activities of each organ, although He appears to borrow their form as fire borrows the form of the flames, He does not act Himself. He cannot be affected by the shadow of change.

He is neither born nor does He die. He neither grows nor shrinks. He cannot undergo any transformation because He is eternal. When the body falls into dust, He remains, not being subject to the body.

The Supreme Self, distinct from Creation and its changes, is essentially Pure Intelligence and Absolute Intelligence. He reveals everything, the universe, in all its dimensions, both material and spiritual. He manifests Himself as the witness of Enlightened Intelligence.

Having disciplined and purified your mind, realize the Atman and identify yourself to Him! You will then be able to cross this Ocean of Samsara, each wave of which is a birth or a death.

Firmly established in the Atman, your true essence, you will then enjoy Supreme Bliss.

Shankara *Viveka-Cuda-Mani* 125-136

He is One

He is beyond everything,
and yet He sustains everything.

He is beyond the world
and yet He finds joy in this world.

He is invisible and beyond all perception.
He is far and He is near.

He moves and moves not.
He is within and without.

He is one in all, although they are many.
He is the support of all beings.

From Him comes the Creation
and from Him comes the Final Dissolution.

He is the Light of All Lights,
who shines beyond all darkness.

He is both knowledge, the goal of knowledge
and the end of all knowledge.

He resides in all hearts.

Vyasa *Bhagavad-Gita* XIII 14-17